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The Toxic Screen: Visions of Petrochemical America in HBO's *True Detective* (2014)

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Abstract

This article argues that the use of toxic visual and narrative tropes in contemporary dramatic television can expand our capacity to envision and critique the deadly effects of industrial pollution. The HBO series *True Detective* is an exemplary case study in how evocative toxic images can be integrated into familiar television narratives to animate society's deadly relationship with toxic chemicals. The petrochemical mise-en-scène of *True Detective* enlivens the toxic image with inferential power, or visual enthymemes, that invite audiences to draw connections between traumas that unfold through narrative action and omnipresence of toxic iconography. Developing a concept of the toxic screen, this article illustrates how televisual portraits amplify the inferential power of images to convey the pain of toxic exposure.

Keywords: toxicity, public screen, visual enthymemes, environmental communication, *True Detective*

The first season of the HBO series *True Detective* (2014) opens with a montage of images from Misrach and Orff's (2012) photographic volume entitled *Petrochemical America*, a collection of toxic photographs that document the effects of America's chemical industries on the Louisiana landscape. The images capture the optics of toxic exposure throughout the 85-mile stretch between Baton Rouge and New Orleans known as "Cancer Alley," where residents live in the shadows of nearly 150 chemical factories and refineries. Seldom visible to the American public, Bullard (2010) calls this portion of the country a "sacrifice zone," a site where low-income communities and communities of color are exposed to disproportionately high levels of hazardous toxins (p. 3). As the credit sequence begins, the camera

pans over photographs of corroded chemical factories framed by the dark outline of silhouettes. Throughout the montage, faded portraits of Detectives Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson) and Rust Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) bleed and wash out into images of fuel trains, power lines, highway bypasses, coastline, and colossal petrochemical plants. The sequence transitions to images of crosses and pious parishioners in spiritual ecstasy against portraits of decrepit buildings and the dead bodies of young women with pictures of petrochemical factories projected onto their skin. Portraits of Hart and Cohle are consumed by fire, concluding with a long shot of the two men in a bayou searching for clues with a large refinery looming in the distance. This pastiche of haunting portraits, both real and fictional, helps introduce a narrative that is less of a noir-themed murder investigation than a visual exploration of the degradation of the human condition in advanced industrial society.

True Detective is a crime drama inspired by popular midcentury “dickbooks,” or pulp novels that contained salacious tales of true crime, punishment, and vice (Jenson, 2014; McCann, 2000). Like their predecessors, each season features different plotlines, characters, and settings but retains a central focus on political corruption, violence, and cynical anti-heroes. Season 1 covers a 17-year (1995–2012) investigation into a series of occult-related murders of young women throughout the Mississippi River’s chemical corridor. The detectives’ efforts are frustrated by high-level conspiracies to protect the financial interests of the powerful men responsible for the murders. The series uses diachronic narration to highlight a series of destructive patterns—from the tragic personal lives of the detectives to the precarious social and environmental life of Cancer Alley. While the literal content is gripping, the producers’ extensive film, literary, and cultural references have generated significant debate among audiences and popular critics. Many bloggers made a game of interpreting each episode’s mysterious symbolism, allegories, and creative homages to horror films, existential philosophy, and gothic literature (Laycock, 2014; Michel, 2014). Although the meaning of the program frequently lies between the lines, neither the symbolic intricacies of the murder plotline nor the invocations of mysterious literary mythology capture the significance of *True Detective* as a cultural text. Instead, this article contends that the series resonates as a visual and narrative portrayal of a culture and ecosystem polluted by our collective dependence on industrial chemicals. One of the most politically resonate motifs that stands out from popular speculation is that of *toxicity*, or the insidious effects of chemical contamination inflicted by industry on vulnerable populations.

A phenomenon frequently unseen and difficult to communicate, *True Detective* depicts toxic exposure as a structural force, a constraint on human agency that noticeably inflicts pain on the bodies of vulnerable populations. Environmental communication scholarship, however, frequently illustrates that making toxicity visible is an extraordinarily difficult task. The invisibility of toxins, the unknown timeframe between exposure and the onset of symptoms (Pezzullo, 2007), the difficulty of showing a cause-and-effect relationship (Barnett, 2015), our limited capacity to communicate and interpret the pain of others (Scarry, 1985; Sontag, 2003), and the sublime beauty of toxic landscapes (Peeples, 2011), among other factors make toxicity difficult to represent. Pezzullo (2007) adds that American culture also carries “toxic baggage,” that as a society Americans are often unwilling to examine the destructive relationship between their comfortable lifestyles and toxic chemicals (p. 52).

Therefore, environmental communication scholars have sought to expose this relationship by theorizing the evocative tactics of environmental activists, including toxic tours, photography, art, documentary film, and image events. Although it draws inspiration from toxic art, *True Detective* falls into none of these categories, nor is it an environmental melodrama explicitly designed to change social attitudes (Schwarze, 2006). Nonetheless, the series' use of toxicity as a visual and narrative motif illustrates evocative ways in which television can be deployed to dramatize toxic exposure. Namely, the moving image has the capacity to connect characters, actions, and narrative events to a polluted mise-en-scène, to attribute individual actions to the structural conditions of a toxic screen world similar to our own. In this way, dramatic television can perhaps not only visualize toxicity but also help us unpack our toxic baggage.

In this article, I argue that the use of toxic visual and narrative tropes in contemporary dramatic television can expand our capacity to critique the effects of industrial pollution. *True Detective* is an exemplary case study in how evocative toxic images can be integrated into familiar television narratives to animate how America's relationship with toxic chemicals shapes all social relations. As backdrop to murder and human suffering, the petrochemical mise-en-scène of *True Detective* enlivens the toxic image with inferential power, or *visual enthymemes*, that invite audiences to draw connections between trauma that unfolds through narrative action and omnipresence of toxic iconography. This article contributes to the growing literature on toxic images by illustrating how televisual portrayals amplify the inferential power of images to convey the pain of toxic exposure. Folding evocative toxic imagery into narratives of crime, violence, and the exploitation suggests that there is an intimate relationship between these social phenomena and, therefore, makes the kind of causal, common-sense connections that activists seek when they produce toxic images. I begin by developing a concept of the *toxic screen*, or the assimilation and representation of toxic imagery in narrative television. I suggest that toxicity can be understood as both *represented* and *representative*, as an image or impression referring to real bodies and landscapes exposed to toxins as well as a metaphor for social, political, and economic relations under industrial capitalism. Second, I analyze *True Detective's* use of the toxic screen to reframe human suffering in Cancer Alley as the byproduct of industrialism, militarism, and anti-environmentalism. While the program does not take an explicit stance on the connection between toxicity and suffering, this analysis suggests that its representation of toxicity implicitly invites a holistic environmental justice-oriented analysis of social problems in an advanced industrial society. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how television can be a resource for making toxic exposure more visible and evocative to the public.

The toxic screen

The preeminence of the screen (televisions, laptops, phones, tablets) as the new mode of political mediation has transformed the image into the primary vehicle for the dissemination of ideas (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012; DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; McHendry, 2012). Eclipsing the public sphere, DeLuca and Peeples explain, "the public screen is a constant current of images and words, a ceaseless circulation abetted by the technologies of television, film, photography, and the Internet" (p. 135). The public screen, however, cultivates

short attention economies, disrupts contemplation, and truncates the rational deliberation idealized by some public sphere theorists. Consequently, images and “image events” must enact “critique through spectacle” to disrupt and captivate a public inundated by an endless flow of visual discourse (DeLuca, 1999; DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 134). Indeed, where verbal discourses fail, iconic and disturbing images can activate a liberal citizenry and mobilize the public’s deliberative capacities to create social change (DeLuca & Harold, 2005; Hariman & Lucaites, 2007).

Yet, in a culture of spectacular images, toxic exposure can seem quite banal. Contaminated places can appear relatively clean, leaving spectators unaffected by their visual encounter. As Pezzullo (2007) contends, toxic images can even conceal the extent of contamination, as the effects of exposure are most directly experienced as pain in the bodies of afflicted communities. Yet, “critique through spectacle” can make toxins seem extraordinary, their ubiquity too immense and overwhelming to comprehend or address (DeLuca & Peeples, 2002, p. 134). Thus, images that capture the magnitude of contamination often reframe toxins as something mysterious and beyond our collective understanding. The tension between the mundane and the astonishing poses a significant challenge for environmental justice advocates who wish to expose industrial pollution on the public screen, where attention economy is short and the efficacy of logocentric argument is limited. By environmental justice, I mean a political commitment to linking collective struggles for race, class, and gender justice with environmentalism to expose the disparate impact of toxic exposure in poor and minority communities. It, therefore, necessitates an image politics that provokes audiences to prioritize “cultural and politics questions about bodies of land or ‘the environment’” (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 14). The challenge, then, is making toxicity easy to understand while also demonstrating the complex interconnectivity of social and ecological justice.

Another tension, Peeples (2011) adds, is that toxic images are often beautiful and awe-inspiring, inviting an encounter with the sublime. The “toxic sublime” describes “the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery and ability to inspire awe” (p. 375). Peeples traces the transition from utopian to dystopian images of nature in environmental photography, noting how such portraits “created beauty in destruction” (p. 376). Dramatic images of large and destructive industrial projects might, to a certain extent, conceal visually imperceptible toxins; however, Peeples argues that the incorporation of elements of the sublime into toxic images introduce a series of complex and productive tensions that can move spectators beyond indifference.

Shifting focus to the place of people in contaminated landscapes, Barnett (2015) argues that “toxic portraits” can also mediate tensions between the banal and the extraordinary, beautiful and abject, visible and invisible, by crafting images that make transparent the interdependent relationships of industrial toxins and the painful lives of those in toxically assaulted communities. Drawing from Butler’s (2004) concept of “precarious life,” Barnett suggests that “victims of toxic contamination must be depicted in ways that foreground the interconnectedness of human bodies, built environments, and the toxins that circulate in those spaces. Calling attention to these connections . . . may better equip viewers to concretely grasp the ways in which living and dying are socially facilitated experiences”

(p. 409). Taken together, Barnett's emphasis on the power of images that infer "possible death" and Peeples' examination of sublime landscapes suggests that toxic images cannot only activate deliberation in a society of visual abundance but also act as a visual mode of propositional argument that helps complete a reasoned defense for environmental justice.

Indeed, images not only make inferences that can be crafted to supply unstated warrants missing from verbal arguments but also reference, contain, and restage propositional arguments in a visual form (Cloud, 2004; Edwards & Winkler, 1997). Palczewski (2005) explains, "argumentative engagement, thus, is not confined to discursive clash, but can be manifest by occupation or alternate culture form" (p. 386). Hence, although Peeples' recovery of toxic images is premised on producing a sublime experience that disrupts argumentative stasis on issues of environmental justice, Barnett's conception of toxic portraits calls on images to produce more complete arguments, to make more pronounced visual enthymemes that demonstrate cause-and-effect relationships between industrial activity and bodies in pain. To elaborate on these scholars' insights, I suggest that environmental communication scholars should also attend to the *moving* toxic image, or what I call the *toxic screen*, where toxic imagery is dramatized through popular television.

A majority of scholarship on representations of ecological destruction focuses on either explicitly pro-environmental films (Hammond & Breton, 2014; Mellor, 2009; Rosteck & Frentz, 2009; Salvador & Norton, 2011; Von Burg, 2012) or still images in news reporting, advertising, photographs, and children's fiction (Corbett, 2006; Dobrin & Morey, 2009; Slawter, 2008; Wolfe, 2008). But, one reason to attend to the toxic screen is that television has been recently flooded with toxic images of pollution and economic maldevelopment. For instance, HBO's *The Wire* (2000–2006) tours audiences through the uneven development and polluted landscapes of Baltimore, *Treme* (2011–2014) explores the everyday experience of disaster capitalism against the environmental devastation of post-Katrina New Orleans, and *Hemlock Grove* (2013–) derives its horror from the toxic scenery of postindustrial Pennsylvania. Likewise, images of the polluted landscapes of the American South linger in the background of the traumatic and horrifying stories presented in programs such as *Rectify* (2013–), *True Blood* (2008–2014), and *The Walking Dead* (2010–). Meanwhile, AMC's *Breaking Bad* suggests that methamphetamine kingpin Walter White, who profits from the sale of deadly and addictive chemicals, developed terminal cancer from early life exposure to toxic compounds. Other programs such as *The Killing* (2011–2014) juxtapose the precarious lives of murder victims with economic and environmental blight of urban cityscapes. The small screen has begun to visualize toxicity.

In each of these texts, toxicity is an implicit though central element of the narrative that frames character relations and plot development in the context of a polluted mise-en-scène. The scenic arrangement and detailed cinematography suggest that landscapes circumscribe character agency, direct plot development, and structure the viewer's aesthetic experience. Although fictional, their mise-en-scène draws from the visually dramatic markers of toxic landscapes (imposing industrial infrastructure, smoke, mold, corrosion, rot, rust) and precarious living conditions of industrial capitalism (poverty, illness, vulnerability, exploitation). These programs are often shot on location or arranged to appear similar to real contaminated communities. Audiences may be familiar with these locations by way of circulating images, news, tourism, or lived experience. They are invited to view characters'

physical and emotional pain as environmental; that is, the cause of their pain can be found somewhere in the complex interactions between the polluted ecology and the cultural atmosphere.

Scholarship on the rhetoric of place illustrates how such scenery can function not as backdrop but as an active participant in the program's narrative (Endres & Senda-Cook, 2011; Shome, 2003). McKerrow (1999) suggest place is unfortunately seen as "externalities influencing discourse . . . as physical entities having no other meaning beyond what appears as common-sense evidence of one's competence in performing according to communication standards" (p. 271). To the extent that place is seen as an argumentative resource, it is because of its discursive construction not inherent symbolic power (Blair, 2001). Thus, Endres and Senda-Cook advance the concept of "place-as-rhetoric," the notion that places are not only articulated through language but exert their own rhetorical force. Place-as-rhetoric illuminates "rich intersection of bodies, material aspects, past meanings, present performances, and future possibilities" (p. 261). Hence, the setting of Cancer Alley contributes meaning not through dialogue but by resonating an iconic place where the toxicity of industrial culture materializes. This concept of place reveals how what is traditionally seen as context can have strong rhetorical consequences on screen.

The toxic screen situates contamination as a common place for an exploration of the contemporary human condition. In other words, toxic exposure is a taken-for-granted element of everyday life in an advanced industrial society. Toxicity is neither banal nor extraordinary; it is portrayed as a complex but discernable collective trauma that pervades everyday life in zones of human sacrifice. The dramatic and imposing mise-en-scène creates a visual enthymeme that calls on audiences to view disparate events and character relations as inextricably bound to the toxic scene. Thus, the toxic screen incorporates Peeples' conception of sublime experience with Barnett's emphasis on emplacement, interconnectivity, and the possibility of change. Put simply, the toxic screen presents precarious lives in large industrial landscapes where the causes and effects of exposure are transparent and accessible to audiences.

Although the toxic screen has been featured in films about environmental activism such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000) and *A Civil Action* (1998), I suggest the toxic screen's most significant cultural work is implicit and visually subversive. Instead of presenting extraordinary through compelling stories of environmental justice, the toxic screen acts on audience's "common sense," or the assumed values, norms, and beliefs that form the basis of popular ideology. The toxic screen is, therefore, an environmental frame that depends neither on a social problem plotline nor on an explicitly pro-environmental melodrama. Like many challenges to capitalism, the potential limitations of explicitly pro-environmental texts are that they can be absorbed and reframed to support the underlying ideologies that support the toxic economy.

Take for instance the underlying liberal individualism that structures eco-savior films in which one charismatic environmental crusader saves a community threatened by industry (Murray & Heumann, 2014; Pezzullo, 2006). With their emphasis on individualism, legal reformism, and political moderation, the radical potential of such films is ultimately compromised through a reaffirmation of the core tenets of American liberal capitalism. DeLuca (1999) also notes the limitations of rational discourse in environmental activism,

including the constraints of a corporate media and the rhetorical norms of visual culture. Therefore, as a supplement to explicit environmental justice messages, I argue that flooding the screen with toxic images, narratives, metaphors, and other forms of symbolic action creates an enthymematic association between industrialism, pain, and injustice. As an additional form of publicity, fictional media texts can also be a valuable resource for portraying toxic exposure. Theorization of the moving image illustrates how toxicity is uniquely enlivened when it operates enthymematically within the visual and narrative components of dramatic television. Environmental justice, therefore, can function as a commonsense response to the taken-for-granted connection between human suffering and a toxic background.

The “Yellow King” of cancer alley: The case of *True Detective*

In the remainder of this article, I illustrate the potential of the toxic screen by engaging in a visual and narrative analysis of toxicity in *True Detective*. The program is a fitting example of the concept because the petrochemical mise-en-scène visually connects toxic exposure with a narrative of senseless murder and exploitation. The series’ cinematography also relies on a series of long, wide-angled, and aerial shots to show the proximity of industrial waste to scenes of literal human sacrifice. Thus, I locate a series of visual enthymemes that suggest a relationship between narratives of murder, dehumanization, corruption, and the tolerance of toxic exposure. These visual cues create a commonsense association between toxins and murder, enlivening toxic images with political resonance. An analysis of visual enthymemes attends to how images present abbreviated logical syllogisms that require audiences to supply missing premises and unspoken assumptions (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Blair, 2004; Finnegan, 2001; Jenkins, 2008; Young, 2015). Birdsell and Groarke argue that interpretation of visual enthymemes requires scholarly attention to the immediate visual context, or the “visual commonplaces” images draw from to complete persuasive appeals (p. 6). Smith (2007) adds that critics should account not only how visual enthymemes enable multiple interpretations but also how those meanings are contingent on cultural agreement between image and audience. In attending to the moving image, I argue that one must account for the interaction between visual and narrative cues that work in tandem to suggest to audiences what kind of cultural knowledge they should supply to complete the argument.

True Detective’s “visual commonplace” is Cancer Alley, a selection that on its own is implicitly political (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, p. 6). The Mississippi River petrochemical corridor is one of the most conspicuous sites of toxic exposure in the United States. Louisiana produces nearly one-quarter of the nation’s chemicals and is the nation’s leader in toxic exposure. Predominantly African American and low income, the residents of the corridor experience disproportionately high rates of cancer (Taylor, 2014). Environmental justice advocates argue that industry views this population as highly expendable (Allen, 2003). Mah (2014) contends that the chemical corridor is an enduring legacy of American slavery where “descendants of slaves in plantation country now live in poor, predominantly Black residential neighborhoods in close proximity to the toxic chemical factories of ‘Cancer Alley’” (p. 103). The setting imports a well-documented history of toxic exposure

and environmental racism, making it easier for producers to visually infer a specific relationship between the characters, the plot, and the petrochemical landscape. I focus primarily on the visual techniques employed throughout the program, concluding the analysis with how visual enthymemes and narrative elements operate synergistically to complete the argument that toxic exposure produces individual and collective pain, infecting bodies and the body politic.

Aluminum and ash

At the outset of their investigation, the nihilistic Detective Cohle tells Detective Hart that he can taste and smell “the psychosphere,” a cryptic allusion to his hypersensitivity to the polluted atmosphere of the Louisiana backwater. In their travels throughout the chemical corridor, Cohle insists that he tastes “aluminum and ash,” the conspicuous byproducts of industrial activity. Indeed, the two elements are disguised within his name: Rust (aluminum) and Cohle (ash). Cohle’s sensory experience intensifies whenever he is in close proximity to locations related to the murder investigation or individuals who may be implicated in the crime. These verbal references to industrial pollutants are matched by long shots of corroding industrial infrastructure wrapped in kudzu and burned down residential homes. The communities of these areas are depicted as human sacrifice zones: sickly, disorganized, dirty, and precarious. Aluminum and ash are clues that contextualize the disposability of populations living in the chemical corridor. These elements constitute the petrochemical mise-en-scène, a screen image arranged to infer that a series of murders are the result of structural patterns and environmental conditions that reduce the value of life.

The program begins as a 2012 inquiry into the facts of the 1995 investigation of the murder of Dora Lange, a young sex worker. Prompted by a similar murder of a young woman in Lake Charles (LA), Detectives Maynard Gilbough and Thomas Papania conduct separate interviews with now-former detectives Hart and Cohle to discern parallels between the two cases. Gilbough and Papania’s questions imply that Hart and Cohle may have concealed pertinent facts throughout the original investigation and, consequently, never discovered who was responsible for Lange’s death. While the audience is given an omniscient view of the original investigation, Hart and Cohle’s divergent narrative accounts reveal inconsistencies and deliberate distortions of the past. Oscillating between the past and present, the show details how Hart and Cohle collude to disguise gross misconduct, and consequently fall into destructive behavioral patterns. This diachronic view contextualizes both the failure of their investigation and their own personal relapses in structural and atmospheric terms. In other words, the chemical corridor is a terrible place with a toxic culture that pervades all aspects of social relations.

Thus, toxic images of ash and aluminum infer that Lange’s murder is the byproduct of industrialism. Cohle and Hart’s investigation begins at the murder scene, a site that is physically and symbolically polluted. Lange is found in an incinerated cane field, still smoldering and blanketed in black ash. Staged in prayer at the foot of a large tree, her body is adorned with a crown of antlers and surrounded by satanic symbols, a juxtaposition that deliberately conflates the sacred and the profane. Upon studying the scene, Cohle refers to the killer as a “metapsychotic,” which in Freudian terms means that he ascribes to a mythological worldview and killing is his way of mapping his inner psychosis on the external

world (see Freud, 1915). Cohle continues to describe Lange's body as a "paraphilic lovemap," which suggests that the killer is aroused by objects and acts out his taboo fantasies through ritualistic murder. The desecration of the serene cane field with symbolism of death and taboo desire orients the audience to a polluted time and place. Lange's body has been used and discarded like the other industrial waste products that pervade the rest of the contaminated community.

Aluminum and ash also reappear at key moments in the narrative. For instance, the series illustrates Cohle's personal atrophy in scenes depicting his self-destructive beer consumption (aluminum) and cigarette smoking (ash). During his interview with Gilbough and Papania, Cohle chain-smokes and makes effigies of murder victims carved from aluminum beer cans. Throughout the process, Cohle lays out his nihilistic view of humanity, indicting what he refers to as the illusion of the modern individual as something that only exists in the "locked room" of one's own head. Although the effigies help make his point, they also infer that the modern individual is the byproduct of industrialism, figuratively carved out of aluminum engulfed in an atmosphere of ash and smoke. At other points, aluminum and ash provide clues to Lange's mysterious death. In one sense, the investigation reveals how Lange sifted through the ashes of her life in search of meaning and truth. Found in Lange's diary, a yellow flyer for a religious revival leads Hart and Cohle to the ashes of an incinerated church. Presumably, this is where Lange met her killer and was ultimately consigned to death. Her search for truth met a fitting end at an abandoned church, contrasted against a refinery spewing toxic smoke. Indicated by an investigation trail strewn with factories, ash, smoke, and hazardous waste, Lange's social world was structured by hazardous industrial products.

In sum, images of aluminum and ash are powerful visual enthymemes. Their unnatural and imposing presence in the local ecosystem invites audiences to supply the premise that in places where toxic exposure is tolerated, the lives of the marginalized and vulnerable are jeopardized. This connection is made possible by commingling images of dead bodies among a landscape filled with industrial waste and byproducts. Thus, the program infers a cause-and-effect relationship between the presence of these elements and probable death.

Mapping toxicity

The series juxtaposes chemically polluted landscapes with bodies in pain, an experience that is difficult to communicate through images alone. In doing so, the program maps the circulation of toxins as they travel through the landscape and into the bodies of characters. This visual enthymeme invites audiences to see how toxic exposure manifests in bodily pain. On a larger geographic scale, the use of long and aerial shots shows both the scope of ecological ruin and the proximity of toxins to everyday life. Scenes of Cohle and Hart traveling through the chemical corridor begin as aerial shots that capture the relative closeness of industrial factories to contaminated communities. These shots also reveal the inadequacy of public infrastructure: dilapidated roads and bridges, broken power lines, and isolated residential zones in vulnerable flood plains. Finally, aerial shots make human activity look incompatible with the landscape's natural beauty. Factories, roads, and power

lines appear unnatural when contrasted with the beauty of surrounding swamps, wetlands, and bayous. These shots evoke the toxic sublime, summoning the awe of large industrial infrastructure polluting complex and beautiful ecosystems.

Scenes of Cohle and Hart traveling switch from close shots of the two in the car to long shots of the landscape from ground level. Movement between these shots helps connect their dialogue with a *mise-en-scène* composed of abandoned buildings with broken windows and collapsed roofs, engulfed in grass, dead trees, and kudzu and people who appear unhealthy, dirty, and hopeless. Cohle and Hart's first conversation elaborates on the toxic inferences in the cinematography. Gazing at the scenery, Cohle expresses his belief that human consciousness was a mistake of nature, that evolution created a part of nature that is separate from nature. Here, toxic imagery is crucial to the completion of his argument. Although his ruminations seem esoteric, his fatalistic viewpoint is confirmed by visual depictions of human domination of nature: factories and homes overtop pristine wetlands. Cohle's exhortations also help map the corridor as a human sacrifice zone. He tells Hart, "people out here, they don't even know the outside world exists. Might as well be living on the fucking moon." Cohle's cynicism is countered by Hart's willful ignorance. He dismisses Cohle's observation by retorting, "all kinds of ghettos in the world." His dismissal symbolizes the privileges afforded to those in positions of relative power to ignore the plight of those living in crisis. Cohle, on the other hand, voices the visual and sensory experience of what is transparent in the program's visual depictions of the landscape.

Finally, the series maps toxicity in the bodies of residents living (and dying) in the chemical corridor. Take for instance the symbolism of Dora Lange's body: intoxicated with synthetic drugs such as lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and crystal methamphetamines. This dangerous mixture of these hazardous chemicals connotes the corrosive effects and bodily vulnerability that accompany toxic exposure. If we read Lange's body as a synecdoche for the social body, the unwanted presence of hallucinogenic substances in her bloodstream suggests that society itself is under the influence of toxic chemicals. Indeed, Hart and Cohle's investigation reveals the corrosive effects of various synthetic compounds. For instance, Cohle suffers from intense hallucinogenic flashbacks throughout the investigation, the aftereffects of excessive drug use during his previous work as a narcotics officer. Meanwhile Hart self-medicates with alcohol, which has destructive consequences for his family life. Moreover, the two interview witnesses also visually display the physical symptoms of toxic exposure. Lange's mother explains that after working with dry-cleaning chemicals for 20 years, she frequently experiences "storms," or crippling headaches and seizures. Her jaundiced fingernails, bloodshot eyes, seizures, and disabled body visually communicate the pain of toxic exposure. The two also interview the family of another missing girl, Marie Fontenot, whose uncle has become a paraplegic after experiencing an unexplained "cerebral event." It is no coincidence that the Fontenot property is littered with garbage and satanic symbols, and through aerial shots is shown to be in close proximity to a massive oil refinery.

The toxic mind

Through cinematography and narrative, the program presents not only a social body but also a social mind in deterioration from exposure to industrial chemicals. These synthetic

substances distort perceptions to such a degree that they begin to align the populace's worldview with that of the killer. The "psychosphere" Cohle describes is one in which people are vulnerable and predisposed to primitive symbols. This is exemplified by Hart and Cohle's discovery of Lange's drug-induced obsession with "the yellow king." Here, the program references Robert Chambers's (1902) *The King in Yellow*, an obscure collection of gothic vignettes about a millennial America blind to its own imperial hubris (Moustoutzanis, 2014). Throughout Chambers's original collection, characters encounter the enigmatic play *The King in Yellow*, a cursed text about a stranger's odyssey to the mythical city of Carcosa. If individuals read beyond the first act, the text purportedly drives them into madness. Carcosa is a once-great city in toxic ruin and the story of its demise is so horrifying that it promulgates insanity. Emmert (1999) explains that the mythology symbolizes "an unhealthy society with a sick past, an ailing present, and a jaundiced future" (p. 40). Like Chambers, *True Detective* constructs a visual narrative of America in ruin where toxicity warps and distorts the perceptions of its residents.

With references to Carcosa, analysis of Lange's private journal details a drug-induced descent into madness. Her notebook features selections from Chambers's "Cassilda's Song" and is dotted with black stars and references to Carcosa. Cohle reads out her notebook loud: "I close my eyes and saw the king in yellow moving through the forest. The king's children were marked. They became his angels." Indeed, the bodies of those under the influence are "marked." In some cases, the marking is visually explicit. For instance, Hart and Cohle interview Lange's friend, whose body is covered in tattoos of black stars. In other cases, the mark is an unidentifiable ailment. In this iteration of the *King in Yellow* mythology, a toxic environment victimizes the poor and distorts their perceptions. Similar to Chambers's jaundiced view of progress, the show illustrates how advanced industrial society has ceased improving the human condition. The collective mind and body of *True Detective* reflects the polluted bodies of the individuals victimized by industrialism. The series updates and gives visual form to Chambers's mythology to present America as a modern Carcosa: a yellowing, or jaundiced, landscape in toxic ruin that disables its inhabitants both physically and mentally.

Chemical warfare

The series' reliance on spectacular violence evokes the repressed memories of failed U.S. military incursions into the developing and postcolonial world. The wars the series restages are implicitly toxic: paramilitary skirmishes over and with hazardous chemicals. This imagery includes impenetrable jungles, war-torn ghettos, clandestine police actions, guerilla compounds, outlaw soldiers, indiscriminate violence, and most importantly, chemical warfare. Here, the series draws from the optics of seemingly endless cycle of American neo-imperial wars throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Like these interventions, Hart and Cohle engage in a series of clandestine jungle incursions that ultimately fail to address the underlying crime. The series metaphorically restages the environmentally destructive patterns of American military invasions through the personal lives of the characters. With references to the iconography of the Vietnam War, these paramilitary skirmishes illustrate the toxic consequences of the military-industrial complex.

The environmentally destructive imagery of war is manifest in Cohle's subterfuge into the bayou's criminal underworld. Cohle's battle begins when he receives information that Lange was last seen with Reggie Ledoux, the prime drug supplier for a notorious motorcycle gang (the Iron Crusaders). While Cohle misleads Gilbough and Papania that he took time off to visit his father, the audience is able to observe Cohle's preparation for his illegal clandestine operation. He retrieves a stash box packed full of guns, ammunition, explosives, drugs, and alcohol. To maintain his cover, Cohle is forced to assist his contact "Ginger" and his White power associates in a raid on a rival African-American drug gang. Ginger tells Cohle that he needs a "good soldier" to complete the mission. Cohle warns that without a good strategy, the raid would be "like Mogadishu." While this verbal reference cues the audience to the military subtext, the *mise-en-scène* of the raid completes the allusion. Cohle agrees to intervene into a long-standing conflict between what are ostensibly two competing warlord clans who violently struggle to control the trade in hazardous chemicals such as LSD and methamphetamines. The scene is lawless: Poor White outlaws prepare to rob another Black drug gang in what resembles a war zone. Aerial shots from the helicopter's perspective portray the dilapidated projects as a battlefield populated by warlords and insurgents. Shots from below show residents roaming the streets like armed civilian militias. For audiences acquainted with news footage of U.S. interventions into civil conflicts, the scene repeats the tragically familiar pattern of international military violence.

The series also evokes the toxic subtext of war through visual and verbal references to the Vietnam War. In one sense, the war is conjured through allusions to "the jungle." Cohle observes at the outset of the investigation that rural Louisiana shares parallels with the tropics, commenting in Episode 1, "it's like there was never anything here but jungle." Most importantly, Hart and Cohle's covert paramilitary operation culminates in a violent confrontation at Ledoux's haunting jungle outpost. Fortified by trip wires, landmines, and improvised explosive devices, Ledoux's property resembles a Viet Cong military encampment. The site is composed of a series of makeshift buildings and rail boxcars covered in paramilitary camouflage, thicket, and kudzu. Cohle explains that the place "reminded me of my dad talking about Nam, the whole jungle thing." He describes a "monster" as the camera closes in on Ledoux with an oversized gasmask over his head and a machete in hand. The producers based Ledoux's costume on images of 14th-century plague doctors who adorned long-nosed masks to prevent them from breathing infected air (Jensen, 2015). Reminiscent of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the monstrous introduction to Ledoux is primal and barbaric: the gasmask an inference to the savagery of chemical warfare (i.e., Agent Orange, napalm) and the machete a crude symbol of guerilla warfare. During their invasion, Cohle uses primitive survival techniques acquired from his father (a Vietnam veteran) to track their enemy. The stage is set for a violent paramilitary exchange between agents of Western law and the uncivilized guerilla warriors of the jungle. Here, the series restages Vietnam within a toxic *mise-en-scène*, alluding to a history of chemical warfare and its destructive consequences.

The sacrifice zone

The series reinterprets Carcosa as a terrible place where the wealthy elite sacrifice women and children. It is a labyrinth of interconnected tunnels in a remote bayou that is littered

with the bones of the dead. It is guarded by Errol Childress, the deformed and illegitimate son of Billy Lee Tuttle, a well-respected member of the Louisiana elite. Billy, a prominent Christian minister, and his brother Edwin, the state's governor, use their wealth and political connections to keep Errol's identity a secret. A site where the powerful exploit the weak with impunity, *True Detective's* Carcosa is a synecdoche for larger patterns of exploitation in the chemical corridor and similar human sacrifice zones. Childress, or "the yellow king," is but the ugly face of systemic political and economic corruption. Carcosa represents a more extensive nexus of power between church, state, and industry that resemble a neoliberal economic order Giroux (2008) characterizes as the "biopolitics of disposability" (p. 587). Carcosa, the toxic city of gothic mythology, stands in for a prevailing economic order in which the wealthy exploit the most vulnerable in society to raid the public coffers for their private financial gain. The Tuttle family symbolizes the toxic dysfunction of the chemical corridor, where industry views people as expendable. With the audience now visually familiar with the workings of toxic chemicals in bodies and landscapes, the series representation of toxicity implicitly connects political and economic dysfunction to locations where toxic exposure is accepted. Here, the narrative shows how toxic chemicals corrupt society from the body to the body politic.

The program concludes that Childress is merely a patsy for the economically powerful, his murders indicative of the slow degradation of the human condition under advanced industrialism. The Tuttle family's wealth and influence are linked to a series of privatization initiatives that exploit young children for profit. Cohle uncovers the systematic abuse of children that took place during Billy Lee Tuttle's "Wellspring Initiative," a program to supplant public schools with private Christian academies throughout rural Louisiana. Cohle discovers suppressed reports of child molestation involving teachers, pastors, and even Childress and Billy Lee Tuttle. His efforts to expose the Wellspring Initiative are circumvented by Billy Lee's occult murder task force and Edwin's overtures to higher police administration. And while Hart and Cohle's careers stall, the police who cooperate with the Tuttles' requests or ignore evidence that might have led law enforcement to Childress are rewarded for their discretion. It is the pillars of the community and industry—not an individual pariah—that are ultimately responsible for Lange's death. The murder investigation illustrates how the poor and marginalized are the most victimized by the collusion of state and industry. Moreover, the Wellspring Initiative is a fitting example of disaster capitalism: industry capitalizing on the shock of widespread impoverishment and natural disasters to privatize the public good. Ironically, the Tuttles are the source of the very crisis that they attempt to abate through corporate entrepreneurialism and religious ministries.

The series' visual enthymemes prime the audience for an interpretation of this toxic culture as interconnected to a polluted landscape. In such a visually haunting place, the slow degradation of the human condition at the hands of industry would no longer seem improbable. The visual and narrative portrait is not of an industrial "enterprise zone" but a human sacrifice zone, a place appropriately known as Cancer Alley. This interpretation of *True Detective* illustrates how the series might serve as a resource to reimagine the politics and environment of the chemical corridor as contaminated by industry. *True Detective* is an exemplary case study of how television screens can be flooded with toxic images to produce a commonsense portrait of life and death in an advanced industrial society. The

series translates Misrach and Orff's *Petrochemical America* into a tale of human disposability; a series of moving images implicitly lead audiences to the conclusion that we live in toxic times.

The potential and risks of the toxic screen

The juxtaposition of a toxic narrative and a toxic landscape helps audiences draw connections between exposure and the slow degradation of the human condition. The program's use of visual enthymemes invites audiences to assume interconnections between industrial pollution and the politics of disposability in human sacrifice zones. Although the still image of the toxic sublime and the toxic portrait remain indispensable in making exposure visible to the public, moving images can be dramatized and connected to disparate elements of a screen world that shares a likeness to life in contaminated communities. I argue that the recurrence of toxic images in narratives of human suffering invites audiences to view industrial pollution as cosymptomatic—both environmental and politically—of poverty and marginalization. Carcosa literalizes the biopolitics of disposability, displaying for audiences the logical limits of industrial destruction of people and the environment. *True Detective's* tour of a toxic landscape and toxic culture illustrates the potential of the toxic screen. Television can help us imagine realities where the toxic environment is habituated as the expected conditions under which audiences will see human suffering.

To conclude, I discuss three advantages of integrating toxic images into television that may help environmental communication scholars to work through some of the challenges of representing toxicity. First, because it is premised on visual inferences, the toxic screen addresses indifference to toxic pollution at an axiomatic level, intervening into the ideological portraits of how daily life appears in a society that tolerates toxic exposure. Audiences can be primed to expect to see suffering and dehumanization in such landscapes. In this way, the toxic screen presents what Murray and Heumann call the "everyday eco-disaster," representations of systemic catastrophe in common place settings. Without direct exhortation from the producers, *True Detective* provides audiences with perspectives on "the dire costs of human's exploitation of the natural world that places blame for the Earth's health squarely on humanity and maps out explicitly the consequences of humans' disastrous choices" (p. 5). The advantage of the television screen is that it offers the ability for producers to comingle toxic images with toxic narratives, a practice that can dramatize the effects of exposure through visual storytelling.

Second, visual inferences to toxicity create a kind of familiarity that enables pollution to become a metaphor for collective pain and injustice. Cozen (2013) argues that metaphors are a vital part of environmental activism and does not argue for specific policies but instead directs us to change our philosophical orientation toward nature. He writes, "artistic expressions that adapt and play with the contingent nature of metaphors, elaborating or complicating meaning through such embellishments . . . can help reorient how we see our embodiment in the world" (p. 301). For instance, to say a culture is toxic in a metaphorical sense is to take for granted a kind of familiarity of toxins that would enable audiences to understand communal dysfunction. Thus, habituating audiences to the dysfunction of life in toxic communities is necessary if toxicity is to become a commonsense way of explaining

other kinds of dysfunction (interpersonal, social, political). But, the toxicity metaphor also illustrates the causes and consequences of social problems and reflects back an understanding of how chemical toxins act on bodies. Presented together, toxic exposure as a physical and symbolic process, the toxic screen cultivates axiomatic understandings of industrial pollution that “redirect our orientation to our bodies and our worlds” (Cozen, 2013, p. 301).

Finally, fictional screen portraits “transcode” political struggles into a popular form that is both accessible to spectators and also within and against dominant ideologies (Kellner, 2010). Fictional narratives can subvert or uphold dominant ideologies by giving some images a taken-for-granted presence on the public screen. Kellner questions “the line between fiction and nonfiction films, as the former can provide experience and access to issues that may penetrate deeper, or awaken individuals more dramatically, than documentary, and thus may help cultivate insight and vision into contemporary issues, as well as deal generally with the human condition” (p. 51). The potential of the toxic screen is that it transcodes environmental justice struggles into a popular form, cultivating ecological perspectives to which they might otherwise be resistant.

Of course, televisual invitations to resist toxicity are not a substitute for activism. Screens sometimes reduce us to cultural shareability wherein sympathetic audiences might simply share horrific images of toxicity in lieu of substantive action. Moreover, it is possible for images of toxicity to become absorbed by a system of discourse that cultivates pessimism about undoing America’s chemical legacy. While our screens have the potential to direct us inward, even toward despair, toxicity has potential to inspire eco-consciousness and motivate action. Returning to common sense, the toxic screen might rework the viewer’s basis for what constitutes a rational appeal. The repetition of toxicity as the natural outcome of our cultural devotion to industrialism might craft a public willing to entertain that there is a connection between social and environmental welfare. After all, as DeLuca (1999) notes, there is nothing inherently logical or natural about industrialism. He argues, “the sense of ‘naturalness’ of industrialism has been achieved, in part, through trumpeting its successes in the rhetorics of progress and technological determinism, while muffling the cries of anguish and protest from its victims and resisters” (p. 163). With the lure of entertainment, the toxic screen can subversively un-muffle the “cries of anguish” silenced elsewhere in the culture, forming the basis of new common sense about environmental justice.

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